



# HEADWAY

NEWS AND VIEWS FROM AHEAD  
PART OF THE EUROPEAN EXECUTIVE SEARCH NETWORK



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## ► BIRTH ORDER

Harvard professor  
says 75% of his class  
are *firstborn*.<sup>1</sup>

◀◀◀ Does childhood position in the family have an impact on success in the workplace? Are *firstborn* children more likely to be high achievers than their younger siblings? Not necessarily, according to AHEAD's recent survey of 638 high achieving candidates and contacts.

In fact 40% of respondents were the *firstborn* of two or more children and another 9% *only children* – so broadly in line with the estimated base rate for a sample of diverse ages, backgrounds and nationalities.<sup>2</sup> And these statistics hardly changed among the 62% of them at senior level.

Meanwhile 71% of AHEAD respondents believe that there is a link between birth order and personality. Yet when asked to assess their own personal and professional traits - like *leadership from a young age* - responses showed only slight and rather inconclusive differences between birth order positions. This could mean that AHEAD's audience generally demonstrates the traits required by companies today, regardless of their childhood position in the family.

However, observations at the edge of the data have interesting implications: *only children* assessed most strongly their achievements, early leadership, independence and stress resistance but were seemingly the least collaborative group. *First born* of others appeared most perfectionist and least happy taking risks but surprisingly were not strongest in self-rating their leadership from a young age. The *younger* of two children were the least ambitious career-wise, but regularly seem to make people laugh and – like the *youngest* – felt they regularly challenge the status quo. *Middle* children saw themselves strongly as mediators, the least well-organised and - like only children - scored their stress-resistance highly; and the youngest in the family gave themselves the highest assessments for charm, well developed emotional intelligence and caring for people. Like *middle children*, they felt strongly collaborative by nature. Interestingly, *youngest* – alongside *only children* – appeared the most creative. Self-assessment of bossiness declined precisely in line with birth order!

'This snapshot makes some sense, as well as bringing some surprises,' commented AHEAD's Managing Partner Guy Vereecke. 'For sure, it's a subject full of complexity which has captured the interest of many.' (see comments p2)

1. Prof Michael Sandel of Harvard says 75-80% of his class are *firstborn*. Yet critics stress that mothers of his students probably have fewer children than norm. [http://nature.berkeley.edu/~amilner/AMillner\\_files/Sandelnote.pdf](http://nature.berkeley.edu/~amilner/AMillner_files/Sandelnote.pdf)

2. 13% were younger of 2; 23% middle children; 15% youngest of 3 or more. 62% senior, 36% middle managers, 2% junior. 57% m, 43% f.

## BIRTH ORDER SURVEY: YOUR COMMENTS

Thank you to all who took part in our survey. Here are just some of the 94 comments:

**Psychologists say the first is a hero, the second a rebel and the third a clown. I found that with my children too.**

Oldest are bossy, in particular when they are female ...

**As first child, you don't have the right to fail and you always have to set an example. That's what I've been doing all my life and it's very tiring !**

First child = blue/red profile = responsibility is key.  
Youngest = green/yellow profile = creative & high EQ

**I'm the youngest of 7 children and the only one who was interested in having a career and also succeeded in it. I believe personality is influenced by one's childhood position but I don't really believe this influences one's career.**

A significant aspect is the 'age-gap' between siblings, and the sex of the other siblings.

**I would expect to see no correlation between childhood position and career ...**

From what I know as a psychologist, first born individuals are more anxious than later born ones. This information comes from studies counting the losses of air pilots during the second WW.

**Not being a psychologist, I hesitate to put childhood position as a key driver of professional traits. I would rather consider parents' personality, family context, education and early professional experience as more impactful drivers.**

I am the oldest of 9. If there is an effect of place in family, it is probably more pronounced in large families.

**Middle children are the most easily ignored in a family. I have been asking many around me, most of them feel the same way. Which means, middle kids could be very independent. It is hard to say if it is good or not.**

Most interesting would be to see if there is a correlation between the childhood position and the type of career. Are top managers more often middle children or first? Are successful artists more often only children?

**I expect that the oldest ones are often more traditional and the youngest ones more creative. I experience that ambition is spread over the entire family (being relaxed or collaborative or well organized might be more influenced by the position)**

NB. (Beware) sample bias - you will get only people connected to AHEAD filling in this questionnaire... probably only high achievers.... Good luck with this interesting topic.



## REFLECTIONS FROM JAPAN



In 1998 AHEAD approached Kit Simmons, a young British candidate working in Oxford, to join Toyota's European HQ in Brussels. Now in a senior role at their Japanese HQ, Kit relates his experiences when the recent earthquake struck...

I was sitting at a meeting table on the 24th floor of our corporate HQ in Nagoya. We received just a 3.5 quake, compared to Tokyo's 5.5 and the epicentre further north, off Sendai of 8.9-9.1.

Nevertheless, it was certainly memorable. I first became aware of movement as the floor fell silent and the window blinds started swaying. We received only horizontal movement. My secretary was clutching her standard issue hard hat and was half way below her desk. Most people just stayed where they were. The swaying seemed to go on for ages but in reality it was about 2 minutes. At its peak, our floor (which is roughly the middle of the building in terms of height, and so is designed to absorb most of the shock) was moving approximately 1 meter from side to side. Like being on a ship.

It was an awe inspiring experience. You cannot truly understand the power of mother nature until you go through it. Suddenly next month's targets do not seem so important.

### How did people react?

In the immediate aftermath, no one understood how serious it was; we went off to dinner as usual that evening and it wasn't until I reached home and switched on the TV, that I understood what had actually happened; over 20,000 people were missing as a giant Tsunami, now estimated to have reached 34 metres in places, overwhelmed much of the east coast of northern Japan.

In the following days, there was a mixture of fear, shock and everyday life. In Nagoya, which was completely unaffected, everyone showed up for work, and in the evenings, the restaurants were as full as ever. It was hard to believe we were in the same country as those, whose images we could see on TV, who'd lost everything. Then news started to reach us concerning the state of the atomic plant in Fukushima. In many ways this was much more frightening than an

earthquake - which you can see and feel - and which is over in minutes. In the first days, no-one understood how serious the leak was and how in danger we might be (although we were 500km south west of the plant).

In the absence of clear statements concerning the extent of the leak and a general mood of distrust of official government statements (in a culture where issues tend to be 'minimised' and 'harmony' emphasised), a mood of disquiet soon became one of resigned acceptance amongst the locals and, fed by the global media machine, almost unhidden panic, amongst expats.

### If I walked out on my local team at their lowest point, how could I return and look them in the eye later?

One of the biggest issues at the time was trying to get objective reporting as to what was going on. In this respect both the BBC World Service (which became one of the key reference points even for local staff) and the UK Embassy in Tokyo were unsurpassed. The UK embassy took the unusual step of publishing the transcripts of telephone conferences with the UK Scientific Advisory Group (SAGE). SAGE's calm analysis did a great deal to dispel the panic amongst the UK expat community and wider.

Nevertheless, many expats chose to leave or repatriate their families. I chose to stay since I couldn't find any factual reason why I should leave and also because I really felt that if I walked out on my local team at their lowest point, how could I return and look them in the eye later? Nevertheless, I and those who chose to stay found ourselves answering dozens of mails from worried friends and family every day and in the strange position of justifying to them why we were staying put. That was quite exhausting.

### How has Toyota coped with the disaster?

True to its culture, Toyota's reaction was firstly for the safety of its staff, dealers and suppliers and also for its customers. An automated safety system called each employee, throughout Japan, who was invited to confirm their immediate safety and need of assistance. That's quite impressive. Secondly Toyota's resources were mobilised to move aid to the stricken area, using dealerships as distribution centres and focusing on dealers' employees and local communities.

Next, Toyota employees were sent to help get dealerships and suppliers back to basic operating levels as soon as possible; one of the biggest needs in the stricken areas was for mobility. Many customers wanted to repair flood damaged vehicles; mobility and transportation is a basic necessity in the recovery effort.

I think the company's reaction was an interesting insight into the much deeper connectivity between business and society in Japan; Japan is a collective culture and corporations play a significant role in gluing together the individual and society. Working here, that has become much more apparent but the earthquake made the roles even more visible.

### What is your current role?

Here in Japan, I'm working in a General Management role, as part of a programme to globalise the company's management. As such, I'm learning as much as I'm



impacting. Although like Russia, the main satisfaction comes from developing younger staff; giving them an insight into western management approaches, including the space to spread their wings, take decisions and make mistakes in a safe environment. That's quite different from the Japanese management style they might have experienced so far.

### It must be quite a contrast to your previous assignment in Russia. What was your mission there?

Before Japan, I worked for almost 5 years as a board director at our Russian operations, responsible for the After Sales business. Still today, I look back on that time as the best experience and opportunity of my lifetime - I had the chance to lead the team through all the challenges associated with the tripling - and then halving of the market within 5 years.

The chance to shape the business - and especially the culture - was amazing. The average age of our employees was just 28. Thanks to a strong education system and the 'rampant capitalism' they have lived through, they were very streetwise and fast learners. There is no better feeling than watching your team grow in ability and confidence. It was the most fulfilling experience I could imagine and personally changed me deeply; maybe strangely, the most significant thing for me was demonstrating and proving my own skills to myself.

Moving from Russia to Japan, was indeed quite a contrast. Daily life here has been surprisingly simple although you need professional help to get through all the official administrative requirements. Office life has probably been a greater challenge, since working inside a large Japanese company is completely different from visiting one. There is a strict hierarchy and very formal rules and rituals surrounding even the simplest activities. In many ways I can feel a growing gap between Japanese business and the 'younger' popular culture surrounding it. And that, together with the need to truly 'globalise' is probably the biggest challenge facing Japan today.

### What advice would you give to a young professional presented with an unexpected opportunity, as you were?

When AHEAD approached me out of the blue almost 13 years ago, I never intended to spend my career working abroad or in the automotive sector, but I've never looked back. Working abroad has broadened my 'life experience' unimaginably. As for automotive, it is one of the oldest industries but in many ways one of the most dynamic. I've been able to experience so many different fields and markets all from inside one industry. So I'd definitely recommend it.

## ➤ THE MAGIC OF TRUST

Brainworkers – and the way you manage them – are the main competitive advantage for your business, stressed leadership guru Theo Compernelle<sup>1</sup> at HR Magazine's recent conference in Prague.

Today's manager is just like the White Rabbit from Alice in Wonderland, running around with a clock shouting 'I've no time, I've no time, I'm going to be late.' Managers these days shout the same, running into a meeting with a Blackberry. Just as when Alice jumped into the hole – into the unknown – so managers expect the same from their employees, says Compernelle. In fact, multitasking is very bad and will end up in bad brainwork.

**Trust is like a bucket that can only be filled drop by drop, but one careless move will spill it all.**

Indeed over the years there's been a revolution in the employee environment. Nowadays muscles have been replaced by machines; lower intellectual functions replaced by computer. What's left are brainworkers doing work requiring the most human, higher intellectual and social skills.

The problem is that 21st century brainworkers are still being managed like the 'brawnworkers' of the mid 19th century. Brawnworkers or hardworkers were paid for the labour, whereas from brainworkers you simply cannot demand their enthusiasm, loyalty, creativity, ingenuity and readiness for change in the same way. Brainworkers have their own thoughts, relationships and emotions. Their quality depends on their relationship with their management.

Change is betting a certain past against an uncertain future. Intelligent people will only take this bet when they are convinced of the advantage; trust themselves; and trust their team. If there is no trust, there won't be any change. In other words, there won't be any innovation, Compernelle points out. For innovation is all about trial and error. No trust. No trial.

'This was a lively and thought-provoking presentation,' commented AHEAD's Caroline Deruytter. 'It set the tone for a useful conference programme focused on the importance of trust and engagement.' 'These aspects are vital to AHEAD and the way we conduct ourselves towards both our clients and our candidates.'



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Indeed Dr Theo Compernelle is a colourful and outspoken advocate of trust. 'No other aspect of management behavior has such a major positive impact on profit as trust,' he explains in his essay for The Focus<sup>2</sup>. Referring to 30 year old research by Professor Martin Seabrook, Compernelle notes a strong correlation between the personality of the dairy stockman and the milk yield of cows. Interestingly, self-confident introverts got the most milk out of their herds.

**People who give most trust, get most trust.**

'Don't set up bureaucratic procedures that hinder and demotivate 99 people, just to avoid the risk that one person will abuse your trust... Leaders often fail to realize that developing trust costs nothing, apart from continuous attention, but creates huge revenues... Trust is like a bucket that can only be filled drop by drop, but one careless move will spill it all.'

'Developing a genuine interest in people opens the door to trust, so try to really understand what drives your staff... Be generous – delegate the credit for success and take the blame for failure.'

'Building trust is about getting the basics right –the things that once made your parents proud of you. Be kind polite and courteous. Show respect. Be positive. And last but not least, trust others. People who give most trust, get most trust.'

1. Dr Theo Compernelle, MD, PhD is former Suez Chair at the Solvay Business School; former Adjunct Professor-at-Large at INSEAD; former visiting Professor at Vlerick School for Management. [www.compernelle.com](http://www.compernelle.com)
2. Trust, Confidence, and Organizational Brain Disorder or how trust boosts the bottom line, Dr Theo Compernelle, Vol X11/1 p 44-48.

AHEAD is a leading search firm specialising in high achievers. Headquartered in Brussels, we were formerly YESS International Brussels, created in 1990 by Egon Zehnder International. Today AHEAD forms part of the extensive EESN network covering Europe and beyond.

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T. +32 (0) 2 223 23 90, [brussels@ahead.be](mailto:brussels@ahead.be) or consult [www.ahead.be](http://www.ahead.be).  
It would be a pleasure to hear from you.



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